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THE DEATH OF

Naturalistic Photography.

BY

P. H. EMERSON,

*Author of "Naturalistic Photography."*

*"If offence come out of truth, it were better the  
offence come than the truth be concealed."*

FRANCIS BACON.

# A RENUNCIATION.

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*To all Photographers.*



LOVING Brethren that were, I salute you. I owe you one apology, oh! my friends, for in the earnestness of my heart I *partly* misled you. You, who stuck by me in storm and stress I shall never forget—if any of you, after this renunciation, seek advice, ask and you shall receive of my best. You, enemies, who will now rub your hands with small-souled glee, rub on, till it all ends in imaginary soft-soap. You, whom I have in mistaken zeal attacked, pray forgive and forget.

And now list. I, saner than ever, renounce and abjure all theories, teachings and views on art written, and first promulgated by me in sundry works, articles, etc., and finally collected in a volume, entitled “Naturalistic Photography.” I cast them upon the dust-heap.

I am for the present and future neither idealist, realist, naturalist, nor impressionist—*photographic \*impressionist*, indeed!—as though ALL graphic artists were

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\* “A term consecrate to charlatans,” and especially to photographic impostors, pickpockets, parasites and vanity intoxicated amateurs.

not impressionists, and as if the photographic process could give aught but transcripts more or less literal. Shall I forsooth explain this burning of books?

List, you who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

In the fulness of my heart I dreamed a dream. I thought art might be taught by writing. I was wrong, I confess. I, even I, "the lover of nature,"—everyone is that now—preached that all art that did not conform to "truth to nature" principle was bad—that was a fatal sermon to many. From this followed again the idea—mistaken, alas!—that photography *pure*,—(not impure, on rough papers, touched up by clumsy hands)—was an art surpassing all black and white methods. *Eheu!* That this was ever believed! However, I was sincere, enthusiastic, but mistaken, and I was and am no amateur. I have by the sweat of my brow learned, under a master, something of this thing they call art. Being no amateur, I have therefore left the Camera Club, the home of the "amateur." But ye reasonable ones in photography—some of you *are that*, true and worthy sons of the goddess Science, who has little to do with the goddess Art—you will ask, and with right, why this thusness? I respect you true workers in science—ye Abneys, Dallmeyers, Hurters, Driffields, Vogels, Jones, Harrisons, Bolas, Waterhouses, Eders, and others. I will tell you, for the vulgar mob of pseudo-scientists have done naught but prove their ignorance and show signs of the itch—the itch for publicity and venom.

To you, then, who seek an explanation for my conduct, Art—as Whistler said—*is not nature*—is not necessarily the reproduction or translation of it—much, so very much, that is good art, some of the very best—is not

nature at all, nor even based upon it—*vide* Donatello and Hokusai.

The limitations of photography are so great that, though the results may and sometimes do give a certain æsthetic pleasure, the medium must always rank the lowest of all arts, *lower than* any graphic art, for the individuality of the artist is cramped, in short, it can scarcely show itself. Control of the picture is possible to a *slight* degree, by varied focussing, by varying the exposure (but this is working in the dark), by development, I doubt (I agree with Hurter and Driffield, after three-and-a-half months careful study of the subject), and lastly, by a certain choice in printing methods.

But the all-vital powers of selection and rejection are *fatally* limited, bound in by fixed and narrow barriers. No differential analysis can be made, no subduing of parts, save by dodging—no emphasis—save by dodging, and that is not pure photography, impure photography is merely a confession of limitations. A friend once said to me, "I feel like taking nearly every photograph and analyzing it." Compare a pen and ink drawing by Rico or Vierge, in Pennell's book. I thought once (Hurter and Driffield have taught me differently) that true values could be obtained and that values could be *altered at will by development*. They cannot; therefore, to talk of getting the values in any subject whatever as you wish and of getting them true to nature, is to talk nonsense.

It is impossible, in most subjects, to alter your values *as you wish*, and to talk of such things now is mere emptiness and puffed-up humbug.

Some amateurs following Colonel Noverre's REVIVAL of

rough printing-papers LAST YEAR (1889), have thought that salvation lay in rough surfaces. Colonel Noverre's dust-heap was ransacked, and we have heard of a "new departure"—a newer "school," and all the bleat of the overweeningly vain "amateur."

If there can be no scientific basis for an art, as some have asserted, Meissonier can claim to be as artistic as Monet, and Monet as Meissonier. The sharp photographer can assert his artistic rights alongside of the veriest "blottist." So all opinions and writings upon art are as the crackling of thorns beneath the pot. In short, I throw my lot in with those who say that photography is a very limited art. I regret deeply that I have to come to this conclusion. Photography is first of all the *hand-maiden of art and science*. It has and will register new facts of light, form and texture. Pure photography is a scientific method of drawing, and scientists should work on until a true and literal scientific transcript of nature can be made—this by ortho-chromatics, etc.

It will interest some to hear what I think of some points that have been vexed questions in a war I have, I regret to say, stirred up. Composition, as understood by Burnet and others, I hold to be futility itself, though I can appreciate the attempts to meet the difficulties in this matter. The eternal principles of art I have heard so much of are mere catchwords.

*Sharpness v. Diffusion.*—If the work is for scientific purposes, work sharply; if for amusement, please yourself; if for business, do what will pay.

I have, I regret it deeply, compared photographs to great works of art, and photographers to great artists. It was rash and thoughtless, and my punishment is in

having to acknowledge this now. - Think of the marvellous dexterity of the man who with pencil, pen and ink, or paint and brush, produces a masterpiece, the drawing equal to that of the lens, the tones in harmony, the colour delicate and marvellously beautiful. Read Rood's *Chromatics* for a hint of the manifold difficulties surrounding this subject. Then think of the amateur photographer who, if clever, can *in a few weeks* turn out good technical work.

It may be asked then what theories on art I have? I answer at present *none*. What artists I admire? I answer, all good artists and all good art. To what school do I now belong? None. What do I think of writings upon art and art criticisms? Mistakes.

A final word. Suggestions have been made that I get some of my ideas from a book, called "Naturalistic Painting." I have a letter in my possession from an artist, wherein is stated clearly and exactly that \*Mr. Bate had read a paper of mine on *Naturalistic Photography before* his first article appeared in the "Artist." At the Society of Arts, the other day, a paper was read by Mr. Davison—an amateur without training, and with superficial knowledge—in which my *old* ideas were freely and impudently handed about and no credit given me. It was whispered about by my enemies that this person had originated some of the ideas of Naturalistic Photography. To enlighten the public I append a quotation from his letter to me on this point. There are plenty more confessions of "his lack of knowledge;" that his

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\* This does not imply that Mr. Bate took any ideas from my paper; on the contrary, I feel sure his ideas were his own, as were mine.

articles were "drivel," it is his own word, and other confessions of incompetence and proofs of plagiarism, if necessary. He is now welcome to my cast-off clothes if he likes—he or anybody else. It is with deep regret I do this thing, and it is only as a duty to myself. I justify myself by stating that I wrote privately to Mr. Davison, expostulating with him for freely appropriating my ideas and telling him that if he did not give me full credit at the Society of Arts I should publish a history of the matter. He never replied. He can publish my letter in full if he likes. This was Mr. Davison's reply to a letter I wrote to him and others asking them if they minded me thanking them in public for their support. His reply is dated from the Camera Club, 16th December, 1889, ONLY A YEAR AGO. It is, "I AM GLAD AND PROUD TO BE IDENTIFIED IN ANY WAY WITH NATURALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY, BECAUSE I BELIEVE IN WHAT I UNDERSTAND IT MORE AND MORE CLEARLY TO BE, BUT I DOUBT VERY MUCH WHETHER ANYTHING I HAVE DONE DESERVES RECOGNITION."

I sent a copy of *Naturalistic Photography* some time ago for review, to the Editor of the journal of the Society of Arts, and it got a bad notice. All the ideas offered the other night were thus offered to the Society *previously*. Lastly, a special speech, read from a paper by a friend of mine, especially pointing out how I had originated these ideas, was not reported as it was read, the printed report giving altogether a different impression from what the speaker said. Those who heard the original can refer to the speech, as reported in the journal of the Society



of Arts—not Artists, as Mr. J. Pennell has aptly described it. This sort of treatment, which is nothing new to me, may excuse some of my bitterly written invectives.

Finally. Some of my friends to whom I have recently privately communicated my renunciation, have wished to know how it came about. Misgivings seized me after conversations with a great artist, after the Paris Exhibition; these were strengthened by the appearance of certain recent researches in psychology, and Hurter and Driffield's papers; and finally the exhibition of Hokusai's work and a study of the National Gallery pictures after three-and-a-half months' solitary study of Nature in my house-boat did for me.

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*P.S. — Will every Secretary of every Photographic Society take four wafers and a sheet of black paper and hide for ever the words "To the Student" in Pictures of East Anglian Life.*

## L'ENVOI.

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HAVING taken some earnest photographers a little way into the Art-world, I feel it my duty to say that, when I have *fully* reconsidered the limited art possibilities of photography and the general philosophy of art, I will write another book; in the meantime, let students avoid all spurious imitations.

# EPITAPH.



In Memory of

## NATURALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY,

WHICH RAN A SHORT BUT ACTIVE LIFE,  
UPSET MANY CONVENTIONS  
HELPED TO FURTHER MONOCHROME PHOTOGRAPHY TO THE  
UTMOST OF ITS LIMITED ART BOUNDARIES,  
STIRRED MEN TO THINK AND ACT FOR THEMSELVES,  
PRODUCED MANY PRIGS AND BUBBLE REPUTATIONS,  
EXPOSED THE IGNORANCE OF THE MULTITUDE,  
BROUGHT OUT THE LOW MORALITY OF CERTAIN PERSONS IN THE  
PHOTOGRAPHIC WORLD,  
BROKE DOWN THE PREJUDICE OF THE OUTSIDE PUBLIC AGAINST  
PHOTOGRAPHY'S VERY SLENDER ART CLAIMS,  
ENCOURAGED MANY AMATEURS TO BABBLE AND MAKE THE WORDS  
"ART," "TRUTH" AND "NATURE," STINK IN THE  
NOSTRILS OF SERIOUS ARTISTS,  
ENDING BY GIVING A FEW A BRUTAL SORT OF APPREHENSION  
OF ART, AND DYING WHEN ITS  
ALLOTTED TASK WAS DONE WITH A GIBE ON ITS LIPS,  
FOR THE "AMATEUR," THE "PLAGIARIST,"  
THE "PRATING TRUE-TO-NATURE MAN,"  
THE "IMPRESSIONIST," THE "NATURALIST," THE "IDEALIST,"  
AND THE HUMBUG.

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